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The idea of commercial society in the Scottish Enlightenment

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BOOK REVIEW

The idea of commercial society in the Scottish Enlightenment, by Christopher J. Berry, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 256 pp., £65, ISBN 978-0748645329

It is reasonable to think that most contemporary westerners, regardless of political orientation, agree that it is broadly a good thing if one is free to choose one's own lifestyle. Should this be the case, it might also be assumed that fully informed people approve of, and even support, the existence of a commercial society which enables this shopping for identities by creating wealth, freedom, choices and social interaction. To illustrate the birth of the complex idea of commercial society, Christopher J. Berry, a leading scholar of the Scottish Enlightenment, has chosen as an epigraph for his latest book a line from Adam Smith illustrating that every man is a merchant.

What Berry seeks to do is to define an idea – eighteenth-century Scots' conception of a commercial society – and study its meaning and influence. Much emphasis is placed on the division of labour and on the close interdependence of the individual members of society. These factors are believed to create unforeseen benefits in the fourth stage of society's stadial progress, which is superior, also morally, compared to any of the earlier stages. Elaborating on Smith's famous example of the butcher in the marketplace, Berry argues that eighteenth-century Scots shared a common vision of a related Smithian example: the production of a coarse coat, which emphasised the interconnections between all the different levels of society that were necessary to produce such a garment (the positive and negative aspects of the pin factory are also discussed extensively in the book). The existence of 'something qualitatively distinctive about commercial society' for the Scots of the eighteenth century is of vital importance for Berry. This implies the normativity of commerce and a sociological account of moral sentiments that explain how people are able to live harmoniously in a society where reciprocity is required from individuals who are largely unacquainted and emotionally indifferent to each other.

Berry has spent his academic career in Glasgow developing his ideas on Scottish thought in several wide-ranging articles and monographs, including his *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (1997) that incorporates a central chapter on commercial society. Over the past few decades he has proved to be one of the scholars working on the Scottish Enlightenment who masters the philosophical side of the subject as well as the details of intellectual history. One of the important features of this new book is to show how the idea of modern liberty was thought to co-exist with material wellbeing. The book forms a largely synoptic account (with a daunting number of cross-references) and seeks especially to show the relevance of what is termed as soft determinism for the Scots (the discussion of how general causes function is Berry at his best). At the same time, Berry demonstrates why he is one of the most coherent and important authors commenting on the crucial topics of masculinity and femininity in the Scottish Enlightenment. In addition to this, property and justice are given due attention, and Berry's theoretical analysis of public debt is useful in particular to understand Smith's relationship to Hume on this matter. Simultaneously, the future orientation of eighteenth-century Scots, relevance of trust and credit in relation to the progress of (civil) society are aptly illustrated.

Given the extent of Berry's academic career and the scope of this work, it might seem slightly surprising that he is somewhat disengaged from recent methodological trends. Berry is fully

aware of current developments, as the splendid notes of this book reveal, but he has decided to remain unmoved by the varying waves of 'Enlightenment debates' (Jonathan Israel, for example, is not referred to). Berry's way of seeing the Scottish Enlightenment, although now constructed around a particular theme, is similar to the approach he took earlier regarding social theory. The book ranges roughly from Hume to Smith, and smaller figures are used to support the main storyline. Berry, who almost exclusively works with published materials, is deeply immersed in his sources. Disagreement among Scottish thinkers is acknowledged, emphasised and analysed to an extent, yet the book thrives on unity. Relevant additions compared to *Social Theory* are, for example, a broader take on Robert Wallace and the balanced role given to Kames. All this adds up to an illuminating analysis of a concept (or an idea) of commercial society that brings together important threads that Berry has dealt with since the 1980s, though the main emphasis is on interpreting Adam Smith's idea of commercial society in a comprehensive Scottish context. Deliberate selectiveness is, of course, something that Berry acknowledges.

The book might have benefited from more direct articulation of the main arguments. While relevant scholars are discussed, Berry does not present his work as an outright challenge to different lines of scholarship, which it nevertheless is. Occasionally the reader is left with the task of determining these points of contention. For example, Berry's reasons for disputing the relevance of the French neo-Augustinian context for the Scottish Enlightenment are not made clear.

The most relevant matter for debate is probably the way Berry juxtaposes the Scottish Enlightenment's idea of commercial society and the republican tradition in intellectual history. Berry's analysis gets to the core of a discussion that may have lost some momentum recently, but which lingers on, namely the relevance of the republican interpretation of early modern intellectual history in Europe. Berry's suggestion is that republican thinking did not function as a decisive context for eighteenth-century Scots. As he demonstrates, even when some stock republican arguments about luxury and related issues were used by Smith and others, they were inevitably detached from a republican context.

For Berry, eighteenth-century Scots shared a vision of the historical development of commercial society (he refers to Smith, Hume, Robertson and Millar in particular, and also Ferguson, whereas characters like Blair are used selectively and Monboddo is dismissed as 'perverse'). Berry does well to emphasise that four-stage theory, contrary to popular belief, was rarely used by eighteenth-century Scots and should rather be seen as one modification of the natural history of society. At the same time, the exact relationship between the historical development of civil society and the stadial theory of progress of society does not become altogether clear. That relationship, however, is important for the argument about the 'normativity' of commercial society. If there is no real alternative for commercial society, or, if most Scots are not framing the question in these terms, then there is considerably less normativity involved in discussions about it.

At times, Berry's desire to emphasise unity simplifies some of the complex questions regarding commercial society and politics, in particular. The deep and interesting comparison between Hume and Wallace for example is not really developed beyond the population debate. This may reflect the fact that many of Wallace's essays remain unpublished and are thus outside the book's scope. But even based on Berry's sources one could give quite a different account of the role of the 'political' in relation to commerce, as viewed by some of the Scots. If, however, the emphasis is on the interpretation of Adam Smith's idea of 'everyman as a merchant' in its wider Scottish context, then one should accept that some differences in tone regarding the nature of commercial society are lost (the relevance of hierarchy and the nature of 'civilised monarchies' spring to mind).

In one sense, Berry's account of commercial society in the Scottish Enlightenment reads as an apology for the Scots (in contrast, to some extent, to John Robertson's *Case for the*

Enlightenment). It is of particular significance for Berry that the Scots were the ones who discovered the idea of commercial society as defined in this book. Berry's fine interpretation deserves to be widely read, although the cover price of this book (£65) makes it hard for students especially to buy a copy of their own. Hopefully a paperback edition will be available soon.

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